

21 Does God Care about Animals?¹

The most interesting, creative, illuminating, dangerous, and misleading exercises in reading the First Testament happen when people study it in light of some new question or conviction that they bring to the text. This question or conviction may open a new window that enables us to see aspects of the text that we had missed, and/or may constitute a mirror that means we do not see the text but see only ourselves reflected. One can watch this kind of study happening in Matthew's reading of Isaiah, or St Bernard's reading of the Song of Songs, or Luther's reading of Romans, or Wellhausen's reading of the Pentateuch, or feminism's reading of Genesis. In practice, all ventures in interpretation create both windows and mirrors. It is thus a further exercise in interpretation to reflect on this process to try to discern where a question or conviction is functioning as a mirror and where as a window. This second exercise ideally requires the participation of readers who are open-minded but a little less committed than the first set of readers. They need to be people who are open to seeing through new windows but are not so committed that they may fail to recognize mirrors.

Study of the First Testament in light of a concern for the earth, the natural world, the animal world, is an example. Are God and the human world in a covenant relationship with the animal world, which ought to affect the way we live in the world? Does that question open up a window on the First Testament itself, or is it an idea alien to it? My conclusion is that it is somewhere in between.

1 Covenant²

In English we use the word "covenant" to denote a moral commitment made in the context of a relationship and undertaken with some formality, which reflects the seriousness with which we intend to take the commitment. A covenant is thus a little like a contract, but the commitment is moral, not legal. It lacks the legal framework and protection of a contract; we do not usually think of suing someone for failing to keep a covenant. A covenant involves a relationship, but no ordinary relationship: it presupposes a level of commitment not required of most relationships, and it involves a formalizing of that commitment that shows we really mean it.

In British English a covenant can be two-sided or mainly one-sided. Marriage is a two-sided covenant; a commitment to giving a certain amount of money to a charity is a one-sided covenant. American English uses the word "pledge" for the latter, and thus the word "covenant" refers more exclusively to mutual commitments. This keeps closer to the etymology of the word "covenant," which suggests a coming together or an agreement. American English thus compares (though a little paradoxically) with the Greek of the Septuagint and the New Testament, which prefers the word *diatheke* to the regular Greek *syntheke*. The latter could perhaps suggest

¹ First published as "Covenants and Nature" in M. J. Cartledge and D. Mills (ed.), *Covenant Theology* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 2001), pp. 21-32 as a response to a paper by Clark.

² See further chapter 9 above.

too mutual, too contractual an understanding of the relationship between God and Israel or the church. German *Bund* also essentially denotes a mutual relationship, often a contractual one; it covers both “covenant” and “federation.”

In Hebrew, *berit* covers the ground of (one-sided) pledge, (two-sided) covenant, and (legal) contract, federation, treaty, or alliance. For instance, God makes a one-sided covenant commitment to Noah and later to the rest of the human and animal world, and another to Abraham, while Josiah and Ezra lead their people in making one-sided covenant commitments to God. Such one-sided covenants presuppose that the other party accepts the commitment (as happens when British people covenant their giving), and in that sense they presuppose an element of reciprocity. But no reciprocal commitment on the same scale is required; the only thing the other party has to do is accept the commitment. The point is highlighted by the nature of the sign that guarantees the Noah covenant, the appearing of the rainbow, which is a fact whether anyone sees it or not. It is highlighted in another way by the nature of the sign that guarantees the Abraham covenant, for accepting circumcision is the only condition for the fulfillment of Yahweh’s very far-reaching promises to Abraham; nothing like the detailed commitment of the Mosaic covenant is required.

God is also involved in the more integrally two-sided covenant relationship with Israel as a people that is formalized at Sinai and renewed in the Plains of Moab. Deuteronomy, indeed, is the most systematically-expressed mutual covenant document in the First Testament. Interestingly, Deuteronomy is also the covenant document that most systematically reflects the nature of the treaty relationship between a major power and a minor power. If the one-sided covenants are more like a pledge or a *diatheke*, this covenant is more like a contract, more of a *suntheke* or *Bund* (though the Greek translations still usually use *diatheke*). Israel can be (and is) sued for failing to keep its side of the contract. Human beings such as Abraham and Abimelech, and David and Jonathan, also make reciprocal covenants, the former at least being more like a treaty.

Theologians have sometimes spoken of the original relationship between God and humanity (and/or God and creation) portrayed in Gen 1–2 as having the nature of a covenant. As happens with many other biblical terms, their use in theological discussion thus comes to be different from their use in scripture itself. This is not so much wrong as something we need to keep our wits about, so that we notice it happening in order to try to avoid reading our categories into scripture. The fact that Genesis does not use the word “covenant” until after the flood is unlikely to mean nothing. I suspect it suggests there is no need for the formalizing or legalizing of the relationship between God and the world when the relationship is in its unspoiled state. It is when humanity is discovered to be wrong-minded from youth (Gen 8:21) and God has acted so destructively towards the world, that God comes to make the kind of irrational promise that Noah receives, and to seal it with a covenant commitment.

The covenant with Noah is different from the Abrahamic and Mosaic covenants in its explicit inclusion of all the beings created on the sixth day, animal as well as human. This makes the Noah story paradoxical, because it also explicitly legitimates the eating of meat. That raises the question

whether even the inclusion of animals in this covenant is for humanity's sake.

2 Animals

Among the First Testament passages that have most to say about animals are these.

Genesis 1–4 include two creation stories that characteristically both raise searching questions within themselves and suggest contrasting perspectives when we read them alongside each other. They do this in their treatment of the animal world. In Gen 1 the created world apart from humanity, including the animal world, has great prominence in its own right and is wholly good. Human beings are put in control of the animal world, including birds, sea-creatures, reptiles, and wild animals (Gen 1:26-28). The control does not imply a gentle pastoral picture. The verb *radah* (NRSV “have dominion”) always denotes hard-won dominance or domination like that of an emperor or an oppressor; it presupposes resistance rather than cooperation (e.g., Lev 26:17; Isa 14:6; Ps 110:2; Neh 9:28). The same is true of the verb *kabas* (NRSV “subdue”: e.g. Josh 18:1; Jer 34:11; Zech 9:15; 2 Chr 28:10). It denotes rape in Esther 7:28.

All this suggests that on the basis of words alone, there was plausibility in the claim that Gen 1 encouraged human spoiling of the earth, though the fact that serious spoiling of this kind began only in the modern period suggests it was not the key factor. Indeed, it is significant that after the giving of control to human beings, by implication they are not supposed to eat animals (nor are animals to eat animals). What kind of control do animals need if they are not to be eaten? Or is the question what kind of control would be needed to stop them eating each other?

The apparent tensions within Gen 1 reflect the fact that its concerns lie elsewhere than ours. The chapter is the beginning of a “Priestly” account of Israel's history. It is one that has a direct relationship with the material in Leviticus enjoining which animals may be eaten and which may not, detailing the sacrifices that involve their being cooked and eaten, and describing the festivals at which they are eaten with particular celebration.

A major point about Gen 1 is to establish the framework for these aspects of Israel's religious life. The emphasis on the structuring of life by the sun and moon and the seasons relates to its significance for Israel's worship life. Similarly, the emphasis on the animals multiplying “according to their kinds” relates to the Priestly emphasis on orderliness in nature that reflects and encourages orderliness within Israel and between Israel and the world. The patterning of what may be eaten at the Beginning, after Noah, and after Sinai is part of the patterning of the Torah as a whole. Now it may be simply a patterning, one no more offering historical information or instructional norms than does the picture of God's doing the work of creation over six days. To require vegetarianism on the basis of Gen 1 would then be a similar mistake to the requiring of belief in a six-day creation or to the opposing of evolution because it conflicts with belief in God's creating animals “according to their kinds.” This conclusion would fit with the fact that other creation stories than Genesis also describe humanity as originally vegetarian. An Egyptian Hymn hundreds of years older than

the time of Moses addresses Amon-Re as “the one who made grass for the cattle and the fruit-tree for humankind.”³ Nor is that understanding only a Middle-Eastern phenomenon.⁴

Yet this may nevertheless reflect a human unease about killing and eating animals, to which traditional cultures lived closer than people in modern cultures, a feeling now reviving in Europe and America. Admittedly if there was an unease, it did not affect people’s lives a great deal. The texts associate vegetarianism with a long-gone time to which we do not belong. Vegetarians are then like naturists. Yet in other respects we assume that God’s purpose in Christ was to restore creation and get behind the mess that issued from human disobedience, and this might imply that vegetarians are not so wrong. At least we may be glad that some people insist on witnessing in this way to that unease about killing and eating animals.

In Gen 2–3 the animals are formed as potential helpers and partners for the sake of the first human being. The exercising of the power to name them then suggests a controlling relationship that limits the sense in which they can be helpers and partners. They are thus explicitly distinct from and subordinate to human beings and not adequate as companions for the man. They are not described as good, and one of them leads Adam and Eve astray. In Gen 4, furthermore, one of Adam and Eve’s sons gets God’s acceptance by killing one of the sheep he looks after and burning part of it as an offering to God, while the son who offers a non-animal sacrifice does not please God. By the time of the flood, the eating of animals is accepted, for God tells Noah to take with him seven pairs of the animals that will be open to being eaten in Israel, but only one pair of animals which cannot be eaten.

Exodus, Leviticus, and Deuteronomy include exhortations that require a number of actions serving the interests of animals. Why is this? It is surely for God’s sake that livestock, like human beings, observe the sabbath (Exod 20:10). Notwithstanding Mark 2:27, Gen 1, at least, does not imply that the sabbath was made for human beings or animals (for instance, because we need rest), except in the sense that it acts as a reminder for them that the week belongs to God. The sabbath was made for God. It is also thus incidental that wild animals benefit from the sabbath year’s fallowing (Exod 23:10-11): that is simply a fortunate consequence of this way of recognizing that the years and the produce of the land belong to God. The rules in Exod 21:33–22.4 [3], in turn, relate to animals purely as human property. Even the requirement to have mercy on your enemy’s ox or donkey may have as its main concern the limiting of the human enmity that destroys community life. It is a way of loving your enemy by being concerned about your enemy’s property, at least as much as a way of loving animals.

Looking back to the exhortation not to muzzle the ox when it is treading out the grain (Deut 25:4), Paul asks whether God is concerned about oxen or whether Deuteronomy is speaking entirely for the sake of human readers of Deuteronomy like himself (1 Cor 9:9). Paul’s rhetorical question is designed to elicit the answer “No, God is entirely concerned about us.” But preachers sometimes find that the trouble with rhetorical

³ Column 6; see *ANET*, p. 366.

⁴ See Claus Westermann, *Genesis 1 - 11* (Minneapolis: Augsburg/London: SPCK, 1984), pp. 162-65.

questions is that people may answer them, and that they are susceptible to an answer that the questioner did not intend. This may apply even to inspired rhetorical questions. Paul gives a hostage to fortune by his question. One of the most creative (which is not the same as being compelling or right) contemporary interpreters of the Torah does argue that its context shows Deut 25:4 to be not really about animals at all. It indeed expresses God's concern for human beings. The ox stands for an Israelite, for the context suggests that the prohibition relates not to the support of the ministry (the topic to which Paul relates it) but to the need not to deny an Israelite his portion in the land. That is the aim of the requirement about brothers-in-law, which follows. In Deut 22:10, the argument also suggests, the ox again stands for the Israelite, who should not marry a non-Israelite.⁵ Animals do commonly symbolize or represent humanity in the First Testament: they provide "food for thought."⁶ The point about references to them may then lie in the varied senses in which they are relevant to human beings. Israel appears "in the mirror of nature"; animals may regularly then be referred to not in their own right but because of their usefulness in this connection. Christianity's abandonment of animal sacrifice is then a sign of its moving to a new root metaphor (that of the human body) in an urban rather than an agricultural culture.

Leviticus 1–7 is dominated by accounts of how to kill animals so that they can be burnt and/or eaten in the course of worship. Whereas the First Testament disapproves of human sacrifice, while recognizing that it was practiced from time to time in Israel as elsewhere, it shows no sign of disapproving of animal sacrifice. Andrew Linzey has taken up the argument that animal sacrifice might have been acceptable because it was a way of enabling a creature to find its end in its return to its maker, and thus find its happiness in God and for God's glory.⁷ Yet the same might be argued with regard to killing human beings for God's glory. It does not provide a rationale for killing animals and not killing human beings in worship.

Several of the prophets disapprove of animal sacrifices, but they give no hint that this relates to a concern for the animals involved. Whether or not they imply a root-and-branch opposition to sacrifice, they make it explicit that disapproval derives from the way the people's worship is not accompanied by right behavior in relation to other human beings. God's disapproval applies to the whole of worship, including prayer, praise, and offerings of other things than animals (for instance, bread). And in the last of the books in the prophetic canon, God's disapproval concerns the fact that the animals are blind, lame, or sick and that people fail to bring the best of their flocks for sacrifice (see Mal 1).

The vision for a New Day expressed in Zech 14:21 includes continuing animal sacrifice. Isaiah 25:6 similarly envisages a feast on this New Day that will include rich, well-marrowed food. And if animal sacrifice becomes redundant after Christ's death, this in itself constitutes no comment on

⁵ Calum M. Carmichael, *The Laws of Deuteronomy* (Ithaca/London: Cornell UP, 1974), pp. 238-40, also pp. 159-63.

⁶ Howard Eilberg-Schwartz, *The Savage in Judaism* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1990), pp. 115-140, whom the rest of this paragraph summarizes.

⁷ *Animal Theology* (Urbana: University of Illinois, 1995), pp. 103-4. He attributes the argument to Eugene Masure as cited by Eric Mascall in his *Corpus Christi* (1965), p. 92.

whether it is disapproved of for the animals' sake. The New Testament contains no pointers in this direction; indeed the death of Christ and the giving of the Spirit explicitly mean that more meat-eating is now possible (see Acts 10).

As in many traditional societies, the eating of meat was much less common in Israel than in modern Western societies; one may note the prevalence of reference to grain and fruit in passages such as Deut 8:7-10; Hos 2:22 [24]; Amos 9:13-14. One implication of the rules about sacrifice is that eating meat takes place in a religious context; it is not a purely domestic affair. Paradoxically, the practice of sacrifice may indeed have the effect of constraining meat-eating, though this is hardly its design. On the other hand, Deut 12 permits people to kill animals for meat in a non-religious setting, because they live a long distance from the shrine. KJV speaks here and elsewhere of the people "lusting after" meat, but the word in question applies elsewhere to God's "desire" and should surely be understood neutrally. It denotes illicit desire in Num 11, but this illicit desire is for fish, cucumbers, melons, leeks, onions, and garlic, as well as meat; though I would go a long way with anyone who recognized that onions and garlic are key to cooking. Israelites enjoyed eating meat; that is treated as a morally neutral fact. What is important is that they should not eat meat in an apostate way.

Psalms 104 rejoices in the way God established the earth securely and provides for it day by day. This includes giving drink to wild animals and making grass grow for cattle, providing trees for birds to nest in and remote mountains for wild goats and coneys, making the night as a time for lions to seek their food from God, and providing the creatures of the sea with their food. Animals, like human beings, are inbreathed by God's spirit/breath. God's address to Job in Job 38—39 also emphasizes the independent significance of the animal world, along with many other aspects of the creation such as desert areas that are empty of even animal life. The wild ass, the wild ox, the ostrich, the horse, and the hawk show that the world does not circulate around a human being like Job. These things indeed "exist 'for their own sake,' because God wishes just those things to be"; "they aren't simply 'for us.'"⁸ In Job 38:39-41 God implicitly provides the lion with its prey, and explicitly does so for the raven, and of course God does that by enabling lion and raven to catch, kill, and eat other creatures. The same point will be implicit in Ps 104 (compare Ps. 147:9).

Isaiah 11:6-8, in contrast, pictures wolf and lamb, leopard and kid-goat lying down together, and lion becoming vegetarian. We might ask of this passage an equivalent to Paul's question, "is it for lambs and goats that God is concerned?" First, God will apparently need to turn some of these animals into something other than themselves; wolves, leopards, and lions that live like this have ceased to be wolves, leopards, and lions. Perhaps Isa 11 is thus picturing God as involved in an act of new creation that improves on the first creation or implements its original design. But the general context in Isaiah does not make one expect discussion of the destiny of the animal world here. Further, the narrow context in Isa 11:1-5 and 9 suggests that Isa 11:6-8 uses talk of unnatural or supernatural harmony in the animal world as a metaphor for harmony in the human world. Strong and powerful

⁸ So Eilberg-Schwartz, *The Savage in Judaism*, pp. 115-40.

people will live together with the weak and powerless because the latter can believe that the former are no longer seeking to devour them. The book called Isaiah indeed opened by using animals to stand for human beings (Isa 1:3), in connection with the question of knowledge, as in Isa 11:9. So they do in Isa 11:6-8.

Whether that is correct or not, it provides a parable for the allusions to the animal world in the First Testament as a whole. It is not a topic of interest in its own right. It is of interest insofar as it relates to the human world. This is paradoxically so even in Job 38—39, which refers to the animal world only to make a point about the human world. The independent significance of the animal world is mentioned only because of its significance for the human world. As Paul puts it, “is it for oxen that God is concerned? Or does he not speak entirely for our sake?” The answer is, Yes, God speaks entirely for our sake. This would cohere with the fact that the vision of a New Day in Ezek 34:25-28 assumes that wild animals retain their instincts to eat living things and promises the community’s protection by devices other than changing the animals’ nature. The same assumption may underlie Hos 2:18 [20], where the arrangements for “that day” include a covenant whereby humanity will be protected from the varying threats posed by the animal world.⁹

3 Feedback

And yet.... I began by noting that people who read the First Testament in light of modern questions often see things there that have been missed, even if they also run the risk of reading modern concerns into the text. The First Testament does not directly assert that women and men have equal status in the world, or that all races are equal before God and must treat each other on equal terms, or that all human beings are equal before God and therefore must not enslave one another, or that human beings must not make war on each other because they are all made in God’s image, or that humanity is to look after the earth rather than exploit it. Indeed the First Testament contains material that can be read either way on each question.

New insight on scripture often comes through people starting from secular premises rather than from traditional Christian ones that have made Christians read scripture according to a certain slant. The dynamics of this process can be seen clearly with regard to the position of women. New premises have enabled people to see things that were always there but were invisible. They then may enable people to read scripture in a way that produces a picture doing better justice to the whole. It will not be surprising if unbelievers are the people who spot truths of God’s which everyone needs to take note of and which they can see because they have the advantage as well as the disadvantage of standing outside our tradition of interpretation.

I have suggested that even the author of Job was unconcerned about animals in their own right. Yet by a feedback mechanism, the book’s appeal to the significance of animals in their own right means it is implying that

⁹ See Francis I. Andersen and David Noel Freedman, *Hosea* (Anchor Bible; New York: Doubleday, 1980), pp. 279-81.

they are important in their own right. If the care of shepherds for sheep can be used as a theological illustration, then Ezekiel implicitly recognizes the appropriateness of a caring rather than an exploitative stance in relation to animals, which would exclude their being treated as if they were machines, or their being reared in the inhumane conditions in which we do raise animals for food.

We need to continue having the discussion over whether (for instance) the acceptance of sacrificing animals in the First Testament and of meat-eating in the New is a point at which the Bible has not worked out the logic of its own presuppositions or whether they put a question-mark by the claim that the Bible points towards universal vegetarianism.